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# THE TWELFTH OF FEBRUARY, 1918

BY MARY HUMPHREY

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LINCOLN's birthday was all that a holiday ought to be, even in a strange land that knows it not. After weeks of rain, the Lorraine sky was so blue the little white clouds seemed swimming in a summer sea. There was that snap in the air that makes it like wine. I thought of the school children at home, of the days that are so unreal now when I used to dread the hour that I must stand up gulping to say "Fourscore and seven years ago"—what a relief when "These dead shall not have died in vain" was safely reached!

As I went early to my work in the prefecture I was thinking, a trick of fancy, of the dead who have proved anew the glory of the battlefield. Here in the war zone with the dull distant booming that becomes the heavy background for all earthly sounds, the meaning of death has been transfigured. This war of today is only the world phase of the war our Lincoln waged to its victorious end, the greatness of the cause transfiguring all the steps up to the hallowed place he shares with the martyrs.

I worked in the dusty old room, among the archives that tell many a story of Nancy, its days of beauty and pride, its stormy course through the dark struggle of 1870, its great part in this cataclysm. Never has the place echoed to such excited voices. For the official decree has gone forth, citizens are to leave as quietly as possible. The people are coming to hear the news and to receive their cards of permission. There is no argument, only the soft tears of despair and grief. I feel the deep current of human misery, but through it runs the electric flash of heroism, of the ultimate sacrifice.

I cannot see to fill out my record cards for tears shed with Madame G. who comes with her old man-servant and maid. They refuse to leave her. Will Monsieur order them to go? Her own possible doom—she shakes her head—what

has the world, safe though it be, for her, with her two sons fallen on the field before her beloved city? But this stupid peasant pair that have served her so long must be forced into a place of safety.

A young factory worker, her wee baby in her arms, stands pleading for the two children she has housed and cared for since their parents were killed in the air raid of October last. She will stay on in the munitions factory if only they can leave by tomorrow's train.

An army officer comes in for papers for his family and servants. His face is anxious and his fingers twitch as he talks. The trains are so crowded, the wife is nervous—the day is too bright for excited nerves. I glance out—can any day be too bright for love and joy? It is Lincoln's birthday, a day for celebration far away at home.

A long line is waiting as we leave the building at noon—peasants in sabots and little knitted shoulder shawls staring straight ahead. They know, for they sought refuge here months ago when Pont-à-Mousson, when Gerbéviller were bombed. They have tasted exile and it is not sweet and now they must go forth again, a long journey where the accent of Lorraine is not familiar.

The Red Cross camions have been busy all day, transporting the possessions of this home-loving people. Strong arms from across the sea have lifted ancestral marriage chests, they have stored carved wooden beds and marble-topped French tables. The boys have cheered and comforted tear-stained housewives who clung to the great bundles of linen and the precious family quilts. They have whistled *Yankee Doodle* and *Over There* to the envy of the small Renés and Pierres to whom all this mighty excursion is a dream adventure come true. It's hard work, but definite and concrete. They see what service they are doing. They hear the words of gratitude and feel how great is the tragedy.

"I never supposed any one could care so much about things," said a khaki-clad truck driver to me, as he stopped to wipe his forehead; "with us folks at home, we move so often, up in one flat and down in another, you know. If a piece of furniture don't fit, we sell it to the next fellow moving in and swap with the one moving out—that's the way we do this house-moving stunt out in Chicago where I hail from. But these poor folks—they tell me it's their great-great-grandmother's wedding-bed, or that's the table some

great-uncle made, or this is the esquitoire—is that what you call it? of some duke or other—and the linen! They just cry over their linen—it all looks like rags to me, but if they feel so bad about it, I try to be as careful as they are—and anyway the poor devils are getting the worst of this Fritz game.”

He glanced up apprehensively. I looked up too. The sky was so blue, so blue. Far overhead a tiny bird was winging its way. A soft hum, like the memory of sound, came through the ether. The bird seemed to swoop, the wings spread, became suddenly pointed golden shafts, then turned to gleaming silver. The whispered hum became an insistent and sharp whir.

“Aviators on the job, all right, all right. Fritz will have his hands full tonight.”

“Why do you keep harping on Fritz?” I said impatiently. “You take all the wine out of spring on a glorious day like this. If you’re from Chicago, you must remember—it’s Lincoln’s birthday! Don’t spoil the holiday!”

“So it is.” He laughed a bit wistfully. “I reckon the kids are fourscoreing all over the State!”

We Americans live in what was a humble French boarding-house. Now the turn of war has made it a popular centre and it is full to overflowing, with two or three tucked into tiny single rooms, making for mine host a harvest that helps to compensate for our overweening ways. The French officers are an exclusive group, sitting at their own table and eyeing with disfavor the vulgar display of wealth shown in our own sugar and butter. There are provincials, heavy-bearded merchants, and quick-eyed, dapper little Frenchmen. Among the Americans are two ladies who have been serving the wounded in small hospitals, day by day going the rounds, supplying through a great committee in the States the little needs that mean so much in the regaining of health and strength. There is a fine, athletic girl, young and enthusiastic, who drives their car. There are several nurses of a unit doing dispensary work in near-by towns in the line of fire and falling bombs.

And last there are the truck drivers, three tables full of fine young American boys, rejected by Uncle Sam, enlisted in the Red Cross camion service,—a good-natured, ready-witted bunch, struggling with a new language, trying to

understand a race that does things in the most unexpected and roundabout way. They lead the pert little maid a merry chase, confusing her count, addressing her in English and French, teasing and helping her, and looking out for all of us in the friendly openhearted American way.

They troop in late to dinner. Some have washed and brushed up a bit, others dirty and tired come direct from a fractious motor.

"Anybody's a fool that tries to drive without understanding these new gears," grumbles Bob, the big fellow from Pittsburgh.

"I never had no trouble with mine," says the one they call Ham, "you had too big a load and you jammed her home too quick."

"Well, she's laid up now and Lloyd'll give it to me when he knows it," is the reply. "There's the whole blooming hospital of wounded to move in the morning——"

Lloyd, their chief, comes in and takes his place—short, well built, with sharp black eyes, cited more than once while he was with the Ambulance. He begins to outline the work for the morning. There is much laughter over the day's experiences. Suddenly one of them lifts his head.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothin'—thought I heard a gun——"

"You've got 'em——"

"Pass the panne, Henriette."

Leisurely we were folding our napkins after an hour at table. The next thing I knew I was standing against the wall, looking at a truck driver pushing the others ahead of him. Something was carrying us all out through the door. The windows were rattling as though giant hands were shaking them. There had been a quick explosion, it seemed in the garden just outside, followed by crashing, breaking, crushing, tearing of timbers and iron, of plaster and glass and stone. Simultaneously the heavy roll of the big guns, the sharp snapping yap of the rapid firers, the bursting of shrapnel, the din and chaos of savage cannon.

The stairs to the cave were full of rushing people. Frenchmen struggled, old women whimpered with fear, a little girl wept aloud for her mother, frantically calling her from the cellar below. The truck drivers were shoving people ahead, calling to the maids to go down first.

Once in the cellar the din sounded a bit further away.

There was no air. White faces began to move before my eyes. Why did every one have such trembling lips, why did their eyes look so big and hollow? The French drew off by themselves and settled down for the night. An old lady quavered piteously and asked questions. The boys joked and laughed, counting the crashes that seemed to be exploding bombs. The two American women stood quietly, strengthening us all by their composure.

Finally there came a lull and Lloyd motioned that we might venture out for air. Through the dark halls we felt our way to the street door. Quiet voices were discussing the amount of danger. Suddenly there was a blinding flash in the sky, shrapnel pattered on the pavement, the anti-aircraft barked again. Through the garden came a little girl, her face ghastly, her eyes round with horror.

"Some one called, they want help," she gasped to Lloyd, who went to meet her. "The café on the corner is destroyed."

On the corner—just a few doors away, all the houses in a row touching each other. A cosy little room was that café, where all day French soldiers could be seen over their wine and newspapers, and where our American boys were in the habit of dropping in for a smoke in the evening. Kept by a woman whose young daughter waited on the customers, it was a place of quiet, friendly cheer.

In an unknowing way I looked about me. Lloyd was gone, one of the trained nurses, a number of the Red Cross boys and the girl chauffeur. One wonders what he will do in such an hour, under the shot and shell of attack in the war zone. I felt a great sense of being face to face with realities. Another savage crashing and banging, the stinging ping of the busy Archies.

"Let's see if we can help."

We hurried out to the street and into another world. The stars were shining gloriously, golden lamps swinging in the sky throughout the ages. Like a tired lady the halfmoon rode down her course. The wind lapped at our faces. Dark forms ran past us, muttering and gasping. The street was filled with débris. Fine powdered dust was settling down. Soldiers with dim lanterns motioned us to the side. I saw the Red Cross boys carrying something, some one. People were pushed back and sharp words of command from the gendarmes maintained a certain order.

On the corner a great hole and jagged walls from which had been wrenched a living home. The very timber and stone that remain seem like bleeding flesh. A bed hangs out over empty space and the blankets flap in the wind. There is an expectant hush, the solemnity of death is in the air.

"Ah," says a voice and one of the officials supervising the rescue work stops to greet us, "you Americans are wonderful—when the *Préfét* arrives, your woman doctor and nurse are the first ones he finds here."

From the darkness into the dim light comes the doctor, her bag on her arm.

"Nothing to do but give a little morphine," she says shortly. "They are past help."

My eyes fall on a man's face, gashed and bleeding, distorted with the horror that has swept him out into the deep current—a soldier he had been, visiting his mother before he returned to the trenches.

"The little boy is dead," the doctor went on, "and the little waitress—the girl was caught on her way to the cave. We could staunch the hemorrhage, but she died—in agony."

That poilu on leave—and the children——

Something I never knew before rises up within me. Through a long line my people are speaking within my soul, those grandfathers who fought in the Revolution, who bled at Shiloh. I feel my resolve, born in this hour, go rushing forth with all the hosts of those who witness and endure to-night.

It is rather for us, the living, to be here dedicated . . .

The great task remaining before us . . .

These dead shall not have died in vain . . .

It is Lincoln's birthday, in France.

MARY HUMPHREY.